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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YEREVAN 000089

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE PROFILE: VAHAN HOVANISSIAN  
(DASHNAK PARTY) -- FIGHTING FOR THE THIRD FORCE MANTLE

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) Deputy parliament speaker Vahan Hovanissian is the presidential standard bearer of the 117-year-old Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), more often known simply as the Dashnaks, (after the Armenian word Dashnaksutyun, meaning "federation"). Hovanissian brings a literate, articulate, and likeable persona to the Dashnak cause, which often struggles with a dour reputation. The ARF is variously respected, disparaged, and sometimes feared for its fierce nationalism, strict party discipline (verging on the paramilitary), and persistent adherence to the outdated, pre-Soviet variation on Marxist-Leninist economic ideology of the party's 19th century founding. Hovanissian can be relied on to win ARF's customary 10-15 percent of votes, which is a necessary pre-condition for a possible second round. More interesting would be the possibility that the ARF might still unify with another opposition party around a common candidate, which could create a true "third force" to be reckoned with. END SUMMARY.

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THE CANDIDATE AND THE POLL NUMBERS  
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¶2. (SBU) CANDIDATE BIO: Age 52, Hovanissian was born in Yerevan to a family with strong Dashnak roots. He got his undergraduate degree in Moscow, and holds advanced degrees in archaeology and history. Hovanissian was actively engaged in the Karabakh and Armenian independence movements, and a main driving force behind the formation of Dashnak volunteer troops in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1990 he formally joined the ARF. Hovanissian was arrested in 1995, along with a number of other prominent Dashnaks, on charges of high treason for having allegedly called for violent overthrow of the government of Armenia's first post-independence president -- and current presidential candidate -- Levon Ter-Petrossian, whose administration rigorously suppressed the ARF as an alleged terrorist organization. These charges were politically motivated, and have since been disavowed by the Armenian government. After nearly three years in prison, Hovanissian and his fellow party activists were released when Robert Kocharian

became president in 1998, though he has never been formally cleared of all charges. He has been a Member of Parliament since 1999, and has held the position of deputy speaker since 2003. Hovanissian's daughter is married to PM Serzh Sargsian's nephew, the son of the PM's brother Alexander "Sashik" Sargsian.

13. (C) RUSSIAN LEANINGS: Hovanissian is widely considered pro-Russian, in comparison with many other ARF leaders. This worldview may be a byproduct of his own upbringing and family roots in Soviet Armenia, in contrast to other senior figures in the cosmopolitan ARF party, who in many cases grew up in Armenian Diaspora communities in Iran, Lebanon, Syria, or elsewhere. These Diasporan Dashnaks who resettled in Armenia around the time of the Soviet break-up tend to retain a more Cold War view of Russia as the Soviet occupier of the Armenian homeland.

13. (SBU) POLL NUMBERS: Hovanissian had the third highest personal popularity rating in a January IRI/Gallup survey, at 43 percent, of all presidential candidates running in the current race, behind Serzh Sargsian at 64 percent. Hovanissian's ARF party, however, was the first choice of only three percent of survey respondents, (sixth place among the major parties), when asked "Which political parties can solve problems." When explicitly asked for whom they would vote if the election were held immediately, Hovanissian attracted five percent of respondents, again in sixth place. COMMENT: We have some concerns that pro-government bias -- difficult to measure or

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confirm -- may have crept into this poll, which we will report septel. END COMMENT

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THE DASHNAKS' "TIGHTROPE" PHENOMENON  
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14. (C) The Dashnaks have walked a political tightrope in harshly assailing the ruling regime, repeatedly accusing it of corruption and abusing citizens' rights, while continuing its "cooperation agreement" with the ruling coalition. This not-quite-membership affiliation with the ruling coalition gives the Dashnaks Hovanissian's deputy speakership, three ministerial portfolios (Social Affairs, Agriculture and Education), and two key parliamentary committee chairs (Defense and Foreign Affairs). The party has so far managed to avoid the fate of Artur Baghdissarian's Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law), which attempted a similar straddle until its ouster from government in May 2006.

15. (C) The ARF's relative success in this may be chalked up to its unique niche in the Armenian political space: the credibility that comes from its long history, strong patriotic credentials, and genuine ideological foundations. It is the only Armenian party that cannot be accused of being just a personal vehicle of a dominant party leader. The party has also enjoyed a special -- albeit arms-length -- relationship with President Kocharian over at least the past ten years. The ARF was a staunch pillar of Kocharian support in the president's wobbly early days in power; Kocharian de-criminalized the party and its leaders as one of his first acts in power. The Dashnaks backed Kocharian in 1999, when the then-politically potent Yerkrapah Karabakh war veterans organization -- mobilized in their outrage over their beloved

founder Vazgen Sargsian's assassination -- was calling for Kocharian's head. Kocharian's Dashnak ties differ from Serzh Sargsian, who is not known to have any such mutual loyalties, notwithstanding his in-law relationship with Vahan Hovanissian. Serzh Sargsian's more direct role in President Ter-Petrosian's persecution of the ARF, as LTP's minister of interior and national security in the 1990s, may complicate his ability to win Dashnak friends.

¶6. (C) The Dashnaks fought hard after the May 2007 parliamentary elections -- where they received 13 percent of the vote, or 16 seats in parliament -- to preserve their independence on certain issues, notably the right to nominate their own presidential candidate rather than back Serzh Sargsian. According to senior ARF member Armen Rustamyan, who currently manages Hovanissian's campaign, the party always airs its concerns within the government before going public.

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ARMENIA'S FIRST EVER PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES  
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¶7. (U) Following the general meeting of Dashnak delegates in September 2007, the party formally announced its plans to nominate its own candidate in the presidential race, to be picked from two nominees: Vahan Hovanissian, Deputy Speaker of Parliament; and Armen Rustamyan, Chairman of the Standing Committee on International Affairs of Parliament. During the last week of November, the Dashnaks held informal primaries by setting up tents in various well-frequented areas across Armenia where people could choose one of the two candidates. Dashnak party membership was not required. Primary voters were on an honor system not to vote more than once, as there was no registration or other mechanism to prevent multiple voting in the non-binding straw poll.

¶8. (U) According to the published results, an impressively high 288,697 people participated in this open primary vote, with 53 percent casting their votes for Hovanissian, and 47 percent for Rustamyan. On November 30, the party's Supreme Council elected Hovanissian as their candidate. (Note: Even though not all of the primary's 288,697

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participants can be considered eligible voters in the upcoming presidential election, their number constitutes about 12.4 percent of the country's currently registered voters. End note).

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NO PROMISES, JUST OBLIGATIONS  
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¶9. (C) According to the party, the Dashnaks' main campaign theme is a public contract that Hovanissian signs with voters. The contract stipulates that he does not promise, but instead assumes the obligation to do the following: reestablish justice; conduct free elections; undertake changes in policies that do not threaten the country's stability; foster social harmony, free citizenry, and a unified country. The contract, which is printed on a campaign leaflet, on one side contains Hovanissian's signature under those obligations, and spaces for contact information and the voter's signature on the other. By the end of January, the Dashnaks said they have received 170,000 such contracts -- about seven

percent of all registered voters -- and aim to get 500,000 by the end of the campaign.

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CAMPAIGN RHETORIC AND OUTREACH  
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¶10. (C) Just like they did in the May 2007 parliamentary elections, the party uses the campaign slogan, "ARF - Our old friend." Some of the sub-slogans read: Our vahan - new president of Armenia"; "No to the past, no to the present - future with vahan"; and "Country's old friend - the future president of Armenia." (Note: The slogans spell Vahan's name with a small v, or "vahan," which in Armenian means "shield." End note.) Hovanissian's brightly colored graphics are perhaps the most professional, well-designed, and appealing campaign materials in the current campaign, but the party seemingly cannot afford to produce large-scale banners, posters, or billboards to match Serzh Sargsian's ubiquitous graphics.

¶11. (C) There are relatively few Hovanissian posters visible in the country, in stark contrast to the almost tens of thousands of store windows, billboards, and walls occupied by the countenance of front-runner Serge Sargsyan. Nevertheless, the Dashnaks are well positioned to promote Hovanissian through the party's ownership of the Yerkir Media TV channel. Yerkir Media, which has covered other candidates in more neutral tones than pro-government channels, provides ample opportunities to their candidate to connect with the public. On January 19, for example, Hovanissian spent three hours on live TV answering callers' questions.

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CAMPAIGN STRATEGY AND ROADBLOCKS  
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¶12. (C) Like most other presidential candidates, Hovanissian is trying to reach out to Armenia's ten regions, and has scheduled over ten trips with over 70 stops in towns and villages during the January 22-February 16 period. Based on official information reported January 24, Hovanissian's campaign fund contains approximately 14 million drams, (USD 46,000) of which Hovanissian himself contributed 10 million. So far the Dashnaks have reported some problems during their campaign, in particular difficulties in renting halls in the regions for voter meetings, and a couple instances of denied public meeting spaces by the authorities.

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PARTY PLATFORM - MAIN POINTS  
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¶13. (C) Hovanissian's 12-page political manifesto outlines his priorities in social, political, economic, military and international fields. If elected, Hovanissian intends to create a just democratic system where citizens are truly free, where civil society is well established, and where

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the judiciary is truly independent and governance transparent. Taking aim at oligarchic monopolies, he pledges to create a competitive market where the state will promote small and medium business development. He promises greater social protection, improved public health and reduced poverty.

¶14. (C) He pledges to provide a strong army

comprised of both conscripted and professional soldiers. He has stated that Nagorno-Karabakh's (self-declared) government must become part of the negotiation process, and the conflict's solution must be acceptable for Armenians in both the separatist region and Armenia. In international relations, he emphasized a balanced approach toward great powers that would protect Armenia's national interests as well as its European integration. He also favors a deepening of ties with Georgia and Iran. He pledges to continue to push internationally for an end to "Turkish animosity" against Armenia, as well as recognition of the Armenian "genocide."

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COMMENT  
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¶15. (C) Hovanissian is something of a wild card factor in the race. His Dashnak party is neither fish nor fowl, neither a genuine regime ally nor truly oppositional. Armenians by now are used to this ambiguous ARF niche in politics; while it makes a number of voters suspicious, many others accept it at face value, giving the benefit of the doubt and grudging respect for the party's historic role. Hovanissian himself is clearly the most likeable Dashnak by public persona, an attribute that is rare in ARF leadership. If large numbers of voters are loathe to cast their ballot for the unloved Serzh Sargsian, but are either afraid to plump for LTP or simply despise the former president as well, Hovanissian might be a "safe" alternative choice to give a protest vote. The party's reputation for toughness may reassure voters that votes cast to Hovanissian will not be stolen by the regime, as many voters assume will be the case for other opposition candidates. Another rumored possibility is that Hovanissian could unite with Vazgen Manukian and possibly then Raffi Hovanissian (no relation). Such a configuration would have enough credibility to constitute a genuine third force in the race, and might even have a shot at beating out LTP to make it into the second round run-off.

PENNINGTON